

Journey to the Championships

By Kristin Rover/USHJA Communications

The third week in August is becoming a special time for Hunter riders across the United States sending them to the heart of horse country in Lexington, Kentucky.

The USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship and the Platinum Performance/USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Championship for horses competing at 3'0" or 3'3" (formerly the Pre-Green Incentive Championship) are continuing to grow in size and scale, and whether competitors are here for the first time or returning to reclaim a title, their stories are unique.

We caught up with several riders with big plans for the championships to learn more about their journeys to Kentucky.

Caitlyn Shiels, of Elgin, Illinois, is preparing for her first USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship riding Cassius (owned by Don Stewart).

"This will be my first year doing it, so I'm going to go in with a completely open mind," Shiels said. "I tend to put a lot of pressure on myself; I want to get a lot of good results for my barn, my owners, my sponsors, but I want to go and really just be able to have solid trips and a good learning experience."

Shiels is strategically preparing for the Championship with classes that include other derbies and a trip to Kentucky before the Championship. She's also working to build a partnership and learn more about Cassius that she started showing last year in the 3'3" Pre-Green Hunter section.

"We have a few shows lined up this summer before the Championship," she said. "I think every class we've done he is really stepping up and starting to learn that much more. It's been an exciting year getting to know him more and feeling prepared for this summer."

Shiels may be eligible for Section B prize money in this year's Championship, in addition to Section A prize money, if she makes it to the Handy Hunter round, because she is considered a Tier II rider, ranked below 40th in the USHJA International Hunter Derby Rider Ranking System, which is based on earnings in derbies over the past three years as of the start of the current competition year.

Last year, Kristy Herrera, of Wellington, Florida, rode the late Helen Lenahan's Miss Lucy to win the USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship after taking over the ride for Jen Alfano, who was injured before the Championship. This year, Herrera may find herself in a similar situation as she is still riding Alfano's horses while Alfano continues to recover.



Caitlyn Shiels riding Cassius. Photo credit: Alison Hartwell Photography



Kristy Herrera, left, and Jen Alfano with Miss Lucy after the 2016 International Hunter Derby Championship. Photo credit: Tricia Booker/USHJA Archives

"She's still on the mend but hopes to be back for that show," Herrera said. "Certainly I'll be doing it if she can't, and I'd be honored to do it for her again."

Herrera said she had a great experience last year being able to ride horses for Alfano in both the Pre-Green and Derby championships, and winning the Derby Championship was above and beyond what she expected.

"It was incredible," Herrera said. "We did have a little luck on our side, but Lucy went unbelievably. I think about that all the time. It was definitely the biggest thing I'd ever won. It changed my life. It really started with Jen giving me the opportunity to ride her horses in that event."

Herrera said the plan is for Miss Lucy to come back this year, and Jen has a program for her and the other horses that she is pointing at both championships, including Alfano's Candid, who won the USHJA International Hunter Derby at Deeridge earlier this season.

An important part of preparing for the championships for Herrera and Alfano has been their teamwork preparing the horses.

"Jen and I have worked together since I was so young, it's a very easy fit for the two of us," Herrera said. "Our relationship is a key part of it."

Will Roberts, of Kingwood, Texas, is not new to the championships that happen each summer at the Kentucky Horse Park. He participated in both the 2016 International Hunter Derby Championship and the 2016 Pre-Green Incentive Championship.

"Last year we had a nice year for both Pre-Green and Derby championships," Roberts said.

Roberts said the tiered system worked in his favor last year, and he ended up Reserve Champion in Section B riding State Hill (owned by Joan Violin), winning more than \$5,500. Again, this year he will be competing as a Tier II rider.

"I think overall it keeps riders that are either on multiple horses or way up in the earnings as their own entity and riders starting out or haven't had a derby horse in a while on a level playing field," he said.

This year he has plans to bring horses to participate in both championships. He said he will likely be showing State Hill again in the International Hunter Derby Championship, and he has several horses that may come to the Platinum Performance/Green Hunter Incentive Championship for horses competing at 3'0" or 3'3", including one named Redding Ridge (owned by Teriann Miller).

The Green Hunter Incentive Program has been beneficial for Roberts when it comes to getting exposure for his young horses. And while the Green Hunter Incentive Program also offers a Rider Ranking System, Roberts falls into the Tier I category, as he is in the top 30 for earnings in the program over the past three years.

"I think [the Green Hunter Incentive Program has] also been tremendous for promotion of horses that you sell and hear of these horses," he said. "I think it's really important promotion-wise for the sport. It's been well-attended from the start. It's a very subjective sport, but I think it's been a very well-judged, well-maintained program."

Traveling from a bit further than Texas, last year, Jenny Karazissis, of Calabasas, California, rode several horses in both the Pre-Green Incentive and the International Hunter Derby championships, but it was her first time participating in the Pre-Green Championship.

"It was a great experience," Karazissis said. "It was the first time I had competed. It really paid off. We ended up winning the first round and were Reserve Champion at the end."

Karazissis is bringing horses to both the Green Hunter and Derby championships this year. She said her goal is to be competitive on the talented horses she is bringing, but more importantly have a good experience with all of them.



Jenny Karazissis riding Big Shot. Photo credit: Katie Aviv

Karazissis is pointing Big Shot (owned by Dulcie Lou Morris) toward the Platinum Performance/USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Championship, and said he is a special horse.

"With the Green Hunter you're going with a horse that is green, and you have to take into account things can happen," she said. "You just kind of go for the experience and hope it pays off."

As for the Derby Championship, she said she is excited to enjoy the competition with horses she's planning

to bring including Nonchalant (owned by Briana Sukert), Legacy (owned by Emily Sukert), Tip Top (owned by Gail Haft) and Really (owned by Michelle Cobb).

"I'm definitely looking forward to it," she said. "Even going in the derbies we have here, I find them very exciting. To be able to go to Derby Championships again this year, I'm super excited about that."

Are you headed to the Platinum Performance/USHJA Green Hunter Incentive or International Hunter Derby championships? We invite all competitors to share their story with us by sharing their photos and stories in social media using the hashtags #DestinationDerby and #GoForGreen. Stay tuned as we follow these riders and more, as they prepare for the championships.